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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 002179

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SUBJECT: NO SURPRISES IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF UZBEK ELECTIONS

REF: TASHKENT 2164

Classified By: A/PAO Stephanie Fitzmaurice for reasons 1.4 (B, D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Local press coverage of the December 23 Uzbek presidential election was flatteringly positive and utterly ignored critical statements, such as that of the OSCE election monitoring mission. Russian reporting was mixed, while most Western reporting was more critical. Among foreign news outlets, only Reuters received accreditation to monitor the polling. Uzbek media quoted extensively foreign observers who chose to praise the elections. The GOU has apparently blocked one Russian website which reported on ODIHR's critical press statement. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) All local media, most of which are controlled by the GOU, presented the presidential election in a positive light. The majority did this by either quoting Uzbek officials or by simply stating themselves that the presidential elections were conducted according to Uzbek law. Sources frequently quoted the chairman of the Central Electoral Commission of Uzbekistan, Murzaulugbek Abdusalomov, making statements to the effect that the elections had adhered to "international democratic norms and principles." In this same vein, both Jahon, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' information agency and UzReport, an independent news site that hews closely to the government line, stated that elections for the President of Uzbekistan on a multi-party and alternative basis is proof in itself that the election system of Uzbekistan complies with international norms.

¶3. (U) In addition to quoting Uzbek sources and editorializing, local news media also quoted foreigners praising the elections. Media outlets UzReport, the National News Agency of Uzbekistan (UzA), Uzbek Television First Channel, and Jahon reported that participating observers from the following organizations and countries praised the manner in which the Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) conducted the election: the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Turkey, Kuwait, Pakistan, Japan, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, and South Korea. UzReport quoted the head of the Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) as saying that the way the GOU organized the elections, providing such conveniences as first-aid posts and lactation rooms, could serve as an example for Russia.

¶4. (U) Jahon and UzA also both quoted American citizens praising the Uzbek elections. Jahon quoted Peter Hickman, the Washington Press Club Vice President, noting that Uzbek voters were in a good mood at the polling stations where they were able to "realize their civil rights in practice." UzReport quoted the president of the Bukharian Jewish

Congress of the USA and Canada, Boris Kandov, who commented on both the growing political and legal awareness in Uzbekistan, as well as the claim that local media provides coverage of the election just as media does in all "civilized" countries. Aftab Kazi, a visiting fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), praised the elections stating that they were held "openly and transparently based on democratic principles." Uzbek TV the night of the election also carried several short interviews with individual foreign observers praising the election, including two Russian emigres to the U.S., Nelly Cavalier and Boris Pincus, and British academic Shirin Akiner.

¶5. (SBU) Almost all international news sources, including The New York Times, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and The Associated Press (AP), were denied credentials to cover the election. The lone exception was Reuters, which was able to register four reporters in Uzbekistan for the purpose of reporting on the election. Lacking firsthand information, the international news sources, including The Washington Post, the AP, the Los Angeles Times, Agence France Presse (AFP), Deutsche Welle (DW), and the Guardian, focused much of their reporting on OSCE/ODIHR's December 24 press release on the election and on general background about Uzbekistan.

¶6. (C) This focus on ODIHR's report was in direct contrast to the local media, which have not yet mentioned the report. According to a December 25 posting on Russia-based Ferghana.ru, ODIHR's statement has not been published anywhere in Uzbekistan, and the local media are prohibited from even mentioning it. The Uzbek government has apparently taken at least one step to actively prevent its citizens from reading about the report by blocking access to a popular Russian news site, www.lenta.ru, which mentioned the critical report. Savvy internet users, however, have ways of circumventing the blocking. (See septel for GOU private reaction to the ODIHR Statement.)

¶7. (U) With reporters on the ground, Reuters was able to offer a few firsthand accounts of the election, stating that Reuters reporters witnessed cases of multiple voting by one person at three polling stations in Tashkent. Reuters also offered quotations from a few leading opposition figures in Uzbekistan, including Nigora Khidoyatova, a member of an unregistered Uzbek political opposition party, who called for more pressure from the West on the GOU.

¶8. (U) Independent news sources in the region also told firsthand of abnormalities in the voting process. Ferghana.ru reported that a number of Tashkent residents received invitations to vote at two different polling places in Tashkent. A few Ferghana.ru correspondents were successful in actually voting at both polling places to which they themselves had received invitations. Other citizens and eligible voters reported not receiving any invitation at all. Uznews.net, which is based in Uzbekistan, reported that security officers in plain clothes at polling stations in the provincial capital of Jizzak advised voters to vote for Karimov.

¶9. (SBU) Russian media sources offered a somewhat mixed view of the Uzbek elections. For the most part, Russian sources, including Itar-Tass and Interfax, followed the lead of the press in Uzbekistan, quoting SCO observers, who said that the presidential election was free, and CIS observers stating that the election was in line with democratic norms. RIA-Novosti did deviate from the other two outlets, quoting both Reuters and OSCE monitors in criticizing the Uzbek polls.

¶10. (C) Comment: The media coverage of the elections on all sides was unsurprising. However, President Karimov himself did provide a surprising comment for those in the midst of digesting election results. Uzbek Television First Channel broadcast a short speech that Karimov gave after he voted, in which he urged local and foreign reporters to abandon self-censorship and seek to be fighters who convey truth to people. He also stated that some journalists should spend

six months abroad learning from their foreign counterparts.
NORLAND